

# *The Motivated Student: Five Strategies to Inspire*

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I hope that our time together inspired you to reflect upon important educational ideas and discuss them with your colleagues. Thinking about and debating relevant issues contribute to your professional growth.

What follows are some ideas for you to ponder.

## Concepts Consistent With Internal Control and Motivation

- Talking about how to “motivate students” misses the point! Your students are always motivated. The key is to create an environment where students are motivated to learn what you are trying to teach.
- The limit of coercion is compliance. Coercion never inspires.
- Coercing students, even when you believe it is “for their own good,” usually damages the relationship. A positive relationship fosters achievement.
- External rewards for academic achievement devalue learning. The unintentional message is, “Learning is not inherently valuable.”
- All behavior is purposeful. It is undertaken to satisfy the needs that we all have. (This includes behavior that we may not fully understand and behavior we typically identify as “misbehavior.”)
- We all share the following needs: to survive and feel safe; to belong and connect with others; to be powerful and competent; to make choices and be autonomous; and to have fun.

- Create a classroom where students can meet their needs by doing what you want and you will have higher achievement and minimal disruption.
- People are doing the best they can at the time. (This includes both you and your students.)
- When people have effective, responsible behaviors in their repertoire, they will generally use them. Our job as educators is to help students develop effective, responsible behaviors.
- Be certain that students can succeed in your class with reasonable effort. When students believe they are doomed to fail, they frequently disrupt.
- Help students see the relevance of what you are teaching. We naturally pay more attention to those things that are meaningful to us. Show students how they can use what you teach.
- Before saying something to a student (or doing something) ask yourself: "Will saying this (or doing this) help me do my job more effectively?" Think long-term. Remember your *goal* and your *role*.
- It is helpful to have clear idea of what you think an "ideal" educator is. Especially when you are having difficulty with your students (or colleagues, or parents, etc), ask yourself: "If I were the educator I would like to be, how would I handle this situation?"
- Never forget why you became an educator. Don't settle for a simplistic "test score" orientation. Commit to educating the whole child.

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### Internal Motivation: A Deceptively Complex Concept

Contrary to the prevailing belief that permeates the fields of psychology and education, we are internally driven, not externally controlled. This fundamental concept belongs at the center of any discussion about responsibility, accountability, and free will. If we are externally controlled, it is unreasonable to expect personal responsibility, accountability, or free will.

The concept of internal motivation initially appears fairly simple. I am driven by my unique wants related to the universal needs woven into the genetic makeup of all human beings. Those of us who practice internal control psychology help people identify what they want. We ask them to look at what they are doing to achieve their goals. Most importantly, we invite them to self-evaluate and plan future behaviors based upon their self-evaluation. It's a wonderfully efficient process when working with individuals in relative isolation.

The concept of internal motivation becomes incredibly complex when relationships are introduced.

Relationships are satisfying and successful to the extent that we share the same goals. If you and I don't have common goals or interests, there is little chance that we will voluntarily spend much time together. The more pictures we share, the more likely we are to develop a deep, satisfying relationship. A

close adult relationship is characterized by lots of shared pictures. Still, even in the best relationships there are differences and conflict.

Consider the typical compulsory public school classroom. This is not two adults willingly coming together in friendship. Far from it. There are 15 to 35 students required to spend substantial time with a teacher they likely didn't choose, taking a class they didn't elect. And while teachers choose their profession, they usually don't choose which students they will attempt to teach in their classes.

There is a diverse conglomeration of wants/goals/objectives in the heads of these internally driven people when they come together in the typical classroom. Some of these pictures are complementary. And when the course begins, there will be a number of conflicting pictures. The only way a teacher can inspire and the students can flourish academically is if they develop a cluster of shared pictures about their time together.

### Three (*New*) R's to Inspire Quality in Your Classroom

The traditional 3 R's (reading, writing, and arithmetic) remain essential academic cornerstones in a quality education. With *No Child Left Behind* and state mandated testing programs well established around the country, there has never been more focused energy on the traditional 3 R's. We can *demand* academic excellence and "raise the bar" but it won't make a significant difference if students are disengaged and refuse to "jump" over higher hurdles. To inspire the highest quality academic achievement, I offer 3 additional R's which are equally important: Relevance, Relationships, and Reasonable expectations.

- **Relevance.** Students must appreciate the relevance of what they are being asked to do if we want them to work hard and learn as much as possible. Course objectives and academic standards are typically imposed upon students without their input. Given the universal drive to be autonomous, teachers may face considerable resistance from their students, especially those with a strong need for freedom. Once students see the relevance of what they are being asked to do, working hard to achieve course objectives may be perceived as need-satisfying. If you want maximum effort from your students, help them see how the work is relevant.

Jensen (1995, p.110) suggests that relevance enhances student retention of what you teach. Creating relevant work does not need to be time consuming. I worked with a math teacher who put her students' names in the word problems she created. That simple strategy engaged the students significantly more than a generic problem taken from the text. That same teacher did an activity around the holidays where students were given a set amount of imaginary money and used advertising fliers

to “buy” gifts. The goal was to spend as close to the allotted budget as possible. Students were given additional credit if they calculated the Massachusetts sales tax. The students improved their skills and enjoyed themselves because the lesson was meaningful to them.

“One of the best ways for students to deepen their learning about a particular concept or process is for them to see how it relates to their lives” (Erwin, 2004, p.90). As a former English teacher, I value writing and want students to express themselves clearly and with precision. Some of the best writing I saw from 5<sup>th</sup> grade students were essays about why we should bring back outdoor recess, extend lunchtime, and hold dances for the younger students. When students are given topics that are meaningful to them, they suddenly appreciate why it’s important to have a strong introduction, substantive arguments, supporting detail, and a strong conclusion. When they know their papers are going to be read by a school administrator, they *want* to have correct spelling, format, and mechanics so they will be taken more seriously.

When I walked through classrooms in my school, I frequently asked the teacher how students could use what they were teaching. I didn’t do that to put teachers “on the spot.” I was trying to ensure that students saw the learning as relevant because it increases academic achievement. When students know they can use something, they are more likely to commit time and energy to learn it well.

- Relationships. To inspire the highest academic achievement, teachers must create positive relationships with their students. When the school year begins, a diverse group of learners brings an array of goals into the classroom. Teachers who bring out the best in their students work collaboratively with them and forge a shared vision of what the class will be like.

The single most important variable in creating a shared vision is to develop a strong, positive relationship with students. There are a number of ways to do this. Simple gestures like greeting each student by name as they enter the class will begin this process. Since students have a need to belong, teachers can make the classroom a place where all students feel welcome and connected. Other strategies that make the classroom need-satisfying include helping all students feel important (not just those who are academically gifted), providing students with teacher sanctioned choices, and creating a joyful learning environment.

I frequently tell the story of Mrs. Watson, an elementary school teacher in Sandwich, Massachusetts, where I live. She is an effective teacher, in part because she creates positive relationships with her students. When my daughter Melanie was in Mrs. Watson’s class many years ago, she was given a homework assignment. When I asked Melanie if she thought it

was important to learn about fractions, the topic of the assignment, she assured me that it was very important “because Mrs. Watson said so!” While Melanie may not have been developmentally ready to appreciate that understanding fractions would be important later in her life, her total trust in Mrs. Watson led her to do the kind of quality work we wish all students would do.

Fostering positive relationships in the classroom does more than create a “nice” atmosphere. Considerable research suggests the strong link between positive relationships and high academic achievement (Schaps, 2003, p. 31; Marzano, 2003, p. 6; Leachman and Victor, 2003, p. 67; Sullo, 2007, p. 28).

- Reasonable expectations. People will only put forth a concerted effort for extended periods when they believe that expectations are reasonable and goals are attainable. Our need for power and competence leads us to work hard when we have a chance to be successful and to give up when we believe that we will fail regardless of how hard we work.

While everyone craves high standards, students must perceive the expectations as reasonable if we hope to inspire more of them to give us their best effort on a regular basis. When our unbridled pursuit of high standards results in students believing they are doomed to failure, we are undermined by our own noble intentions. This is the greatest challenge for those who clamor for increasingly high standards in education.

The following story illustrates the harm that high standards do when students perceive themselves as incapable of experiencing success. I had known Tim for a couple of years. He was a special needs student in the eighth grade. When I met Tim he was in the sixth grade and he told me he had disliked school “from the day I started kindergarten.” He knew what he wanted to do as an adult: to be a welder. Generally quiet and passive, Tim grew animated when talking about welding and proudly told me, “I’m good with my hands. I can take apart anything, fix it, and put it back together.”

Tim was required to take the MCAS, the Massachusetts state testing instrument that all students must pass in order to receive their high school diploma. In eighth grade, Tim said to me, “I might as well just quit now. There’s no way I’ll ever pass that test no matter how many times I take it.” The expectations were beyond what Tim believed he could achieve. Tim was aware of his academic deficits and saw himself as a “loser,” already stripped of his hopes and self-esteem as a 14-year-old eighth grade student. Give him a challenge where success was within his grasp with reasonable effort and Tim worked as hard as anyone else.

Reasonable expectations inspire students. Unrealistic expectations destroy. We can only imagine the results.

It would be bad enough if Tim's story were an isolated example of a student asked to do more than he thinks he can do. In today's high-stakes testing environment, however, Tim is representative of a growing number of students. Aware of their weaknesses, more of these students drop out of school and become lost souls and a burden to society. Aremin and Berliner (2003) cite the high dropout rate in states with graduation tests. When students perceive expectations to be beyond their ability, they often opt out rather than have their failure affirmed.

## Conclusion

Inspiring teachers show students the relevance of what they are asked to do. They actively and intentionally build positive relationships with students. And they develop reasonable expectations so that students who put forth a strong effort will experience academic success. There is no more professionally enriching pursuit than helping every student strive for the highest academic achievement in a safe, nurturing, need-satisfying environment. When we do that, we activate the inherent desire to learn that every student brings to the classroom.

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Ready to move beyond the limitations of the reward/punishment model and create classrooms and schools where more students are inspired to do high quality academic work?

Contact Bob Sullo today and arrange for a staff development workshop or series.

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## Bob Sullo

An educator for over thirty years, Bob Sullo has been an English teacher, adjustment counselor, school psychologist, and administrator. Over the course of his career, he has worked with both regular education and special education students from pre-K through graduation in elementary, middle, and high school.

Bob has worked with thousands of educators and parents, conducting staff development workshops and parent workshops in more than thirty states, Canada, South America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. His presentations focus on the importance of internal motivation and how to inspire students to be academically productive in a joyful environment. Bob's books include *Teach Them To Be Happy* (New View Publications, 1993), *Inspiring Quality in Your School: From Theory to Practice* (NEA Professional Library, 1997), *Activating the Desire to Learn* (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2007), *Managing to Inspire: Bringing Out the Best in Those You Supervise* (iUniverse, 2007), *The Inspiring Teacher* (NEA Professional Library, 2008), and *The Motivated Student* (ASCD, 2009).

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